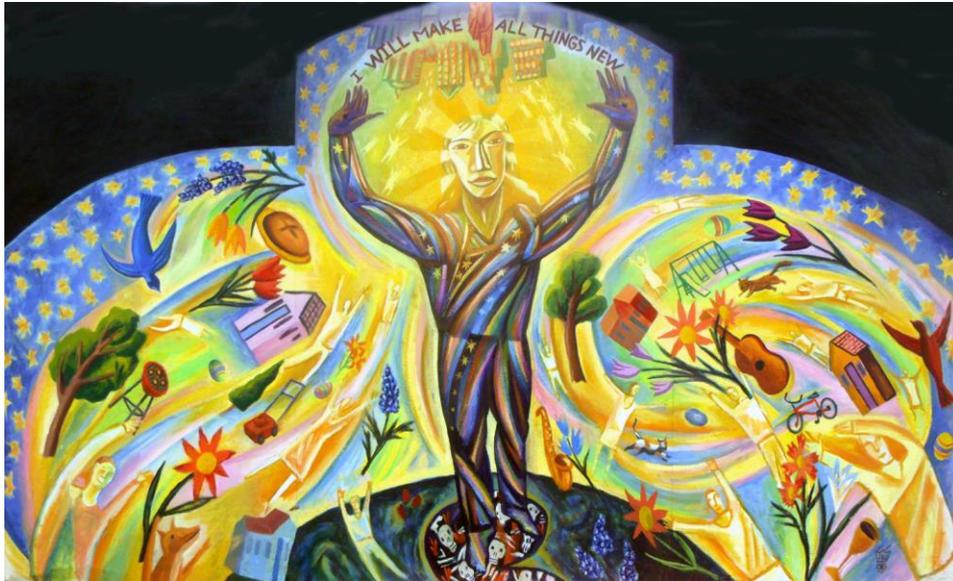


The Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2021
Lenten Lessons from the Garden
Part Two: The Garden of the Holy City
The Spiritual Practice of Maintaining Hope
A Sermon Based on Revelation 21:10; 21:22-22:5
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin
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James B. Janknegt (American, 1953–), Make All Things New, 2005.

Revelation 21:10; 21:22-22:5 ~ ¹⁰*And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. ...* ²²*I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.* ²³*And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.* ²⁴*The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.* ²⁵*Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.* ²⁶*People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.* ²⁷*But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.* ²²*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.* ³*Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.* ⁵*And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

There was an article in the New York Times on February 20, 2021, by Book Review editor Pamela Paul entitled “Your Kids Aren’t Too Old for Picture Books, and Neither Are You.” In it she talks about the power of visual images, arguing that we never outgrow them. Having just read through the final chapters of the apocalyptic book of Revelation in which John, exiled on Patmos, paints vivid word pictures about what God’s restored world would look like, I thought back to children’s books both from my childhood and those that I read to Rachel. So many beautifully illustrated books have stayed with me, but one in particular came to mind. Called *The Gardener* by Sarah Stewart and illustrated by David Small, it tells the story of a little girl named Lydia Grace Finch, who has grown up in a rural area with its lush gardens and beautiful landscapes, close to nature with all its colors, scents, tastes. But it being at the height of the Great Depression, she is asked to move to the city to live temporarily with her Uncle Jim. On August 27, 1935, she writes her Uncle Jim a letter before leaving the farm: “*Dear Uncle Jim, Grandma told us after supper that you want me to come to the city and live with you until things get better. Did she tell you that Papa has been out of work for a long time, and no one asks Mama to make dresses anymore? ... I’m small, but strong, and I’ll help you all I can. ... Your niece, Lydia Grace Finch.*” She has no experience of the urban world with its crowded tenement housing, concrete, cement, and total lack of green space. But she leaves with the encouragement of her parents and her grandmother sends her off with packages of seeds so that she can plant a garden. From the train she writes her grandmother the following: “*Dearest Grandma, Thank you for the seeds. The train is rocking me off to sleep, and every time I doze off, I dream of gardens. Love to all, Lydia Grace.*”

Our first ancestors Adam and Eve knew about gardens. God had allowed them to live in a beautiful one, which is described with these words in the second chapter of Genesis: “***ADONAI, God, planted a garden toward the east, in ‘Eden, and there he put the person whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground ADONAI, God, caused to grow every tree pleasing in appearance and good for food, including the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰ A river went out of ‘Eden to water the garden, and from there it divided into four streams.*** (Genesis 2:8-10, Complete Jewish Bible)

It sounds so beautiful, doesn’t it? Trees pleasing in appearance with lots of good food and a river that watered the garden, which then flowed out in four streams to irrigate the earth. The scripture continues by saying that: ***ADONAI, God, took the person and put him in the garden of ‘Eden to cultivate and care for it. ¹⁶ ADONAI, God, gave the person this order: “You may freely eat from every tree in the garden ¹⁷ except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You are not to eat from it, because on the day that you eat from it, it will become certain that you will die.”*** (Genesis 2:8-17, Complete Jewish Bible)

All initially went well with Adam and Eve in this garden of original blessing. But, over time, they found that they could not resist eating from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The result was that they not only achieved consciousness and the ability to choose both good and evil but they also would someday die. Because of this they no longer were fit to live in the Garden of Eden. The Bible reports God's response to their disobedience as follows:

²² ADONAI, God, said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. Now, to prevent his putting out his hand and taking also from the tree of life, eating, and living forever — " ²³ therefore ADONAI, God, sent him out of the garden of 'Eden to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ So he drove the man out, and he placed at the east of the garden of 'Eden the k'ruvim [cherubim] and a flaming sword which turned in every direction to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22-23, Complete Jewish Bible).

And just like that the gates to the original garden are shut. Slammed in our face. We no longer have access to the tree of life. This is the archetypal story of each and every one of us. We are born into the garden of original blessing where we are in union with God and with the created order. Yet we cannot stay there. We are thrust onto the stage of the larger world to embark on a great adventure.

Like Lydia Grace Finch in the children's story who was forced to move from the innocence of rural country life into the concrete city, Adam and Eve's ancestors also journeyed from life as rural peoples to the development of skills that allowed them to build big urban centers. Places like Baghdad, Tel Aviv, Cairo, Istanbul, London, Paris, Calcutta, Mexico City, New York City, Tokyo, Beijing, St. Louis, Nashville, and more. And along the way as they tested their skills and even traveled into space, a faint memory lingered of their original home, the Garden of Eden, where they were at one with their Creator, other human beings, and the natural order. In the deepest part of our being, almost as part of our spiritual DNA, we remember our divine origins, our original blessing as God's beloved children, remembering that "We are stardust, we are golden ... and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden" ("Woodstock," by Joni Mitchell <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nivr4YZzzME>). Our journey is from Genesis' Alpha in the first two chapters in the Bible to Revelation's Omega in the last two. As we travel with our ancestors throughout many centuries of history, it should come as no surprise that, just as Lydia Grace Finch ended up in a big, sprawling city, the final chapter in the Bible should end not with a rural garden but in an urban garden, the New Jerusalem.

Today we are asked to stand alongside John, the author of the book of Revelation, on a high mountain as we look out at what this new urban garden, the restored Eden looks like. Our scripture today begins by saying: "***And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God***" (Rev. 21:10). The writer of this verse in the book of Revelation is one named John (likely not

John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, but another John who was well versed in the Hebrew scriptures since he drew so heavily on them). He wrote this letter around 95 CE. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 CE and Christians continued to be persecuted. Those who did not address Domitian as “Lord and God” and worship his image were punished, some were imprisoned or exiled, others were put to death. John was sent into exile on a penal colony on the island of Patmos by Domitian (CE 81-96) because he protested the oppressive policies of the Roman empire, including the enforcement of the cult of emperor worship. From the island of Patmos, John writes an apocalyptic piece purportedly about the end times yet really intended to encourage Christians in seven churches in the geographic area that now is Turkey. He wants them to hold out hope and not give in to fear or accommodate to the religious beliefs and customs of the Roman Empire, which in this letter is designated by the term “Babylon” (17:5) or “the great whore” (17:1). God would ultimately prevail!

John invites these Christians and all of us to travel with him to the top of a “**great, high mountain.**” We remember that mountains in scripture signify “thin spaces” where we are better able to sense God’s presence and know what is holy and of God. We recall, as we walk through scripture, how Moses encountered God on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19) and Elijah experienced God’s presence on Mt. Horeb (I Kings 19:11-13). Jesus’ transfiguration occurred on this mountain (Matt 17:1-13). Jesus’ Beatitudes were given on a mountain (Matt 5-7). Jesus commissioned his disciples from a mountain (Matt 28:16). And now we find ourselves with John on a mountain again. This alerts us that something very special is going to happen.

This verse also points out that John is “*in the spirit.*” He is not in his ordinary state of mind but is receiving a vision from God. That explains why what flows out of John’s mouth are descriptive word pictures, metaphors, allegories, and various code words designed to impart special, if not secret messages to the seven churches he is writing to. It is a feast for the imagination whose images were later to be depicted in countless paintings and altar pieces and used by the poets Dante, Blake, and T.S. Eliot. Revelation influenced Handel’s *Messiah*. Images from Revelation 19 were used in Julia Ward Howe’s *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. These words are not to be taken literally, however, as did Timothy La Haye in the popular *Left Behind* book series. Revelation is not a blueprint for God’s return but was rather written to be a source of encouragement and hope for Christians facing persecution and to let them know that, in spite of their suffering, God will indeed prevail in the end.

John describes events like the seven seals of judgment that are destroying the earth, followed by seven trumpets and seven bowls. There are horsemen, demonic plagues of locusts, lakes of burning sulfur, the dragon, beasts from the earth and sea, and the prostitute or whore who engage in a cosmic battle between good and evil with the Lamb and the bride. And now, after all this, John “in the spirit” led by God to a high mountain, a thin space, is about to “unveil” this new

state of being where God will rule with mercy and justice. We suddenly see what is called the new ***“holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”*** (Rev. 21:1). John tells us that ***“on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites ... the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb”*** (Rev. 21:12, 14). The number 12, of course, represents completion in the Bible. When John mentions the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles, he is connecting the Christian church with its Israelite history.

In describing this New Jerusalem, or renewed garden, John says: ***“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.”*** (Rev. 21: 22-24). This certainly is a radical statement to be given to a people whose religion for generations had centered on the Temple in Jerusalem, run by a hierarchical priesthood who offered sacrifices on behalf of the people. Of course, the Temple had been destroyed and the Christians in the seven churches he was writing to were now followers of Jesus the Christ. Yet the destruction of Jerusalem and its beloved Temple were certainly devastating and confusing to them, even if they had left some of their Jewish practices behind. What John is saying to them here is that not only is there no Temple, but the Temple did not even need to be rebuilt because the presence of God the Almighty Creator and God’s son Jesus, the Lamb, were present to them. In this new city God’s love was everywhere manifest. One no longer needed a certain designated sacred space to meet with God. Rather God’s light shone everywhere to the extent that not even the sun or moon needed to light it up. This light was universal, not meant for any particular nation, but all nations and kings of the earth were to be guided by it, just as the Gentile Magi from the east followed the star and brought gifts to the baby Jesus.

This universality is further substantiated by the next sentence, where John states that unlike the original Garden of Eden whose gates were shut: ***²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.*** That is powerful! A place where the gates are wide open and there is no darkness! God’s protective presence is all that is needed. When I read this sentence in the light of our present reality, I could not help but think about how mass shootings over the years caused us to lock the doors of our Christian education building on Sunday mornings to keep our children safe. Or how it presently is costing our nation 2 million dollars a day to keep a huge, fortified fence around our Capitol Building. I thought too about the desire of many in our nation to build a wall on our border to keep people out. Or how in some schools students must pass through metal detectors for fear someone might bring a gun in. Their doors are carefully guarded. This is in such contrast to the new Jerusalem, the new urban garden, where ***“its gates will never be shut.”*** The gates of the New

Jerusalem are wide open. It is a place of hospitality and welcome where the dividing walls between people are broken down. In the New Jerusalem, the renewed Garden of Eden, your nationality, skin color, class, country of origin, gender, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity no longer matter. The Holy City is a place where God welcomes all!

Yet lest we too easily think that John is painting a picture of utopia where there are no dangerous people who might harm us, he continues by saying: ***“But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life”*** (Rev. 21:7). Later he writes that ***“Nothing accursed will be found there any more”*** (Rev. 22:3). Here John is referring to those who choose to follow the ways of the Empire, designated as “Babylon” or “the whore.” In this Holy City we are safe from those whose greed and selfish ambition oppress and diminish us.

John continues in his description of the New Jerusalem, or the renewed garden, by writing that: ***“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city*** (Rev. 22:1-2). With this sentence we are taken back to the river in the Garden of Eden, which watered the earth (Genesis 2:10). Note that this water does not have its origin in the Temple, but the river has its origin in the throne of God and the Lamb (Jesus Christ). Called the “water of life,” it is “bright as crystal” signifying that it is deliciously pure and unpolluted. It runs right through the middle of the streets of this city, reminding us of Psalm 46:4: ***“There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God.”*** How we thirst for this pure water from God! With the Psalmist we lament: ***“As the deer longs for streams of water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I go and stand before him?”*** (Psalm 42:1-2). Even Jesus, on the cross, cried out ***“I am thirsty.”*** Jesus’ was not just thirsting for the living God but also for actual water. How Jesus must mourn with those in Flint, Michigan, whose city water became so polluted through human greed that their children have lead poisoning. Flint’s water problems still have not been solved. How Jesus must mourn with those millions of people in Texas who, because profit was placed ahead of winterizing the electrical grid, still are left without running or safe water in the aftermath of the once-in-a-century storm we just suffered. Yet in the New Jerusalem, which we are waiting and called to help usher in, we will be healed and refreshed by the water of life.

John’s vision of the New Jerusalem continues with these words: ***“On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations”*** (Rev. 22:2). Of course, we are instantly brought back to the tree of life in the garden of Eden, which represents immortality (Gen 2:9). Withheld from humanity, now it suddenly reappears open to everyone. The tree of life whose trunk is so great that it extends over both sides of the river in the New Jerusalem, which is never barren, has

twelve kinds of fruit. No one will ever be hungry or thirsty again! Its leaves even have healing properties not just to treat physical ailments but also to heal the divisions that separate people.

What a glorious place this new Jerusalem, this renewed garden is! Alas, we human beings have made such a mess of God's garden, planet earth. Ours is a place where there is extreme famine, wars, persecution, the neglect of our planet. Listen to this retelling of a traditional story called "The Perfect Globe" as we think about what we have done to God's beautiful garden:

In a museum, many years ago, there was an amazing exhibit. It was a tiny globe, just a few feet in diameter, yet it held so much mystery and so much beauty within it that people traveled for miles and miles, just to see it. ... it was [a] delicate sphere floating in its case. It looked different from every angle. Sometimes, you could see big pools of water in it, and smaller flows of water feeding into the big pools. ... There were bumps on the globe—some big bumps, with white tops, and some smaller, gentler bumps. ... The globe had little sandpits in it with lovely patterns blown by the wind ... it had frosty places too ... And it danced in the space around it, turning on its toes, so every part of it got a turn at facing the light and at resting in the darkness.

People marveled at the thin layer of gas that surrounded this little globe, and noticed that there were holes in it, and that these holes seemed to be getting bigger. They were concerned, in case something was going wrong with it. And sometimes, parts of it would go dark for no apparent reason, and there might be smoke and a strange smell from these parts, and the people didn't quite know why, and they were concerned, because these dark bits never quite seemed to get better again afterwards.

Perhaps most of all, though, people gasped in wonder at the tiny creatures that lived on the globe. Some lived in the pools, and some lived just under the gas wrapping, and others lived on the bumps.

The globe was declared a national treasure, and people paid large sums of money to make sure that it was protected. It had become so precious to them they would have defended it with their own lives. They would never let anyone hurt it. It came to be known as the greatest wonder of all time, and people flocked to see it, to touch it and to love it. They felt that just to be in touch with it would bring them healing, and just to gaze at it would bring them wisdom. They even felt that, without it, their own lives would be meaningless.

That was a long time ago. The treasure has fallen into disrepair now. Some say that the rot set in when the people who used to treasure the globe started to shrivel and shrink because they were so wrapped up in less important matters. The people eventually got so small that they disappeared right inside the globe, and after that, they never noticed it again, and they

completely forgot how they had once treasured and loved it. With no one to cherish it, the globe slowly stopped breathing and eventually it slipped away into space, unregarded. (Margaret Silf, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World*, pp. 200-201).

The churches that John was writing to despaired for their world and their very survival. They wondered whether the world was about to end. Their suffering and persecution were so great that they questioned whether God would restore their world. We today live in the midst of a global pandemic that has taken over 500,000 of our loved ones in the United States. We have seen our Capitol stormed and democracy threatened. We are barely on the other side of a once-in-a-century storm that has been linked to human influenced climate change. Many are hungry, thirsty, scared. We, too, may feel that we are being exploited by a global Empire. Some, like those in the seven churches John was writing to, may feel we are living in the end times.

Unfortunately, there are some Christians who think that Revelation's use of the terms a "new heaven and a new earth" mean that we do not need to take care of this earth. God will swoop down from heaven and restore things, without our having to lift a finger. Yet even little Lydia Grace Finch from our children's storybook knew otherwise. When she arrived in the big city, carrying the seeds that her grandmother had sent with her, she did not despair at seeing no life-giving spaces around her. Rather she set about planting seeds in indoor pots, then in flower boxes outside the windows sills, and then she transformed the roof of her ugly urban tenement apartment into a garden full of flowers and vegetables of every kind. She built a beautiful garden in the part of the city that she lived in, delighting everyone. In a letter she wrote to her family right before being able to return to the rural countryside from which she had come: *"Dearest Mama, Papa, and Grandma. I am bursting with happiness! This entire city seems so beautiful, especially this morning. ... I've tried to remember everything you ever taught me about beauty. ... I've given all my plants to Emma. I can't wait to help you in your garden again. We gardeners never retire."*

John's book of Revelation was never designed to make us complacent or to give up on the world around us. It was written to encourage, give hope, and to inspire. We are on a journey from our original Garden of Blessing in Eden and we are called to help God usher in the New Jerusalem, a kind of Garden of Eden renewed. And God also has left us with seeds in our luggage to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, to visit those who are imprisoned not only in jails or prisons but also those who are imprisoned by poverty, addiction, fear, discouragement. We gardeners are never to retire. We are never to give up hope! With each seed that we plant we are helping usher in that garden, that New Jerusalem where, John concludes:

the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 22:4-5)

Closing Prayer: God, help us to remember that we are stardust and we are golden. We are billion year old carbon. And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden. We pray that we might be your gardeners, tenderly caring for your earth and all those around us, knowing that this is how the new Jerusalem, the renewed Garden of Eden will be ushered in. Help us never to give up hope. May we never retire in being your gardeners. In the name of Jesus we offer up this prayer for the healing of your earth. Amen.